

The Coming of the Bishop

It was in the middle of the 1970's that the bishop came to Green Haven to visit The Exodus Program. He was an old man, over 80, and very Pentecostal. I remember that at different times during the group meeting he would burst out singing, preaching, or testifying to the wonders that God had worked in his life. He told how he was the lowest of the low. A hopeless drunk suffering from all the effects of alcoholism. He said he was so depraved that he even had once tried to have sex with a chicken. It was in this state, he claimed, that God sent an old woman to lift him out of the gutter. She took him home, placed him in her own bed, and nursed his back to health. It was also during his recovery that she introduced him to the power of her God who in turn set him on a new and straight path. This new path led him to a new vocation of being the singer and preacher of the Life-giving Word.

The bishop kept talking about the power of God, but we paid little attention to him. Most of the group ignored him even when he announced to three of the men that he was going to pray every night for them. He finally declared that by the power of God all three would be released from prison within two years. When Roger, Murry, and Sal informed the bishop that they all were serving life sentences and none of them were scheduled to see the parole board in less than 10 years, the bishop didn't bat an eye. In his mind all things were possible, and he was sure that all three would soon be done. Two years later all three had been released through Executive Clemency. A few months after the last was released, one of our members woke up in the middle of the night vividly remembering the bishop. The next morning, he announced that he was willing to try anything to get out of prison and demanded that we invite the bishop again. We found, however, that no one could remember his name and when we tried to locate his church it was not to be found.

Hope is Foundational

Hope is a foundational issue and critical to every person living in prison. In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, a conversation takes place in the prison mess hall between Red, played by Morgan Freeman, and Andy, played by Tim Robbins. Red says to Andy, “Hope is a dangerous thing in here it can drive a man insane.” Andy responds, “Hope is a good thing, and perhaps the only thing.” Both are probably right. In prison hope can drive a person insane or it can be a life-giving path. I have seen both in my work as a chaplain.

Because prison is an upside down world, often the hope that is manufactured there can be dangerous and false. People in prison will manufacture hope if it is not apparent. I have seen men go to the law library every day for years believing that they will find something in their case that will get them back into court and out of prison. And there is always someone in the common memory of a prison, maybe one out of five hundred, who did beat their case in court and get out. But when they find no break in their case they go on a search for new forms of hope.

The pursuit of hope can take many forms. A number of years ago we had as a guest in our Exodus meeting who was an 85 year Pentecostal bishop. He sat in the group but seemed somewhat removed from what was going on. At times he would begin to sing out loud or go into trance where he would be deep in prayer. After the meeting I was surprised to find that he didn't miss a thing that was going on in the session. Three men stood talking with him as we were getting ready to leave. All three had at least fifteen years before their first meeting with the parole board. The old bishop told them that he was going to pray for them and that all three would be out of prison within two years. They thanked the bishop but told him how long it would be before even initial consideration. That didn't seem to bother the bishop at all. He

assured them that they would be out. Two years later all three had received executive clemency and were released.

About six months after their release, Bennie, a member of our group came running into my office and said to me, "Rev., you've got to find that bishop! I'm willing to try anything." We never found the bishop again. It seemed like both his coming and going were a mystery. People in prison at times do believe in and hope for miracles. Years later, most people believed that somebody made up the story about the bishop. Some of us were there. We had seen and heard the bishop and we knew the people involved who were released. Making sense out of it was another matter.

One form of hope that is always impressive in the prison arena is the family connection. In my early years as a chaplain I was puzzled by some men who had hopelessly long sentences but seemed to have a positive attitude and were quite upbeat about life in general. What I discovered was that in most cases there was the family factor. Solid support from the outside family is a very life-giving thing. I remember Charlie Acker. When he came to prison his aunt bought him a twenty-five year subscription to a daily newspaper. During his long sentence several newspapers went out of business. He started with *The New York World*. That became *The World-telegram*. This was followed by *The Herald Tribune* and *The Daily Mirror*. He ended up with *The New York Times*. But that daily newspaper over the twenty-five years was a constant reminder that his family cared. Added to this was the fact that his mother came to visit him at least once a month at whatever prison he happened to be in. also, before coming to prison the family owned a 1939 automobile. His mother had it put up on blocks in a Harlem garage. There it stayed as a symbol of hope that Charlie would return. When Charlie was released twenty six years later the car came off the blocks and returned to service. After release Charlie

took care of his mother until his death in 1992. His mother at that time was over ninety and still in good health.

We held a memorial service for Charlie at The Riverside Church. Some seventy-five people came to the service; most were people who had been in prison. One man who was still in prison sent these words to be read at the service:

A person's name can call to mind many things:
A question mark, a frown, tears.
For Charlie's name always invoked hope and pride:
The hope that can survive decades of prison,
the pride that his humble leadership demonstrated.

Charlie showed us no magic roads or fast money,
But the hard steps of a man
Determined to care for his family and community.
Let's share that fire he found in us.
Let's keep it moving.
For peace and freedom.

Charlie was a legend. A man of integrity,